



Connecting knowledge: A case study of The George Washington University's human services program

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Summary

The George Washington University Human Services Program focuses on engaged learning through service learning by encouraging high academic and ethical standards in its students. In order to better understand the effects of the program on students, we conducted a qualitative assessment in the spring of 2011. We sought to answer these questions:

- What is the student service-learning experience?
- How has the coursework deepened student knowledge and skills?
- To what extent does the curriculum prepare students to meet the professional standards?
- After graduation, how are students drawing upon the knowledge, and abilities gleaned in coursework in their lives and careers?

We situated our work within participatory action research traditions and social change theory (Hale, 2008). We also drew from scholarship that demonstrates that service learning can enhance writing and critical thinking, citizenship engagement, and academic learning (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Eyler & Giles, 2000; Novak, Markey, & Allen, 2007; Simons & Cleary, 2006). While the benefits of service learning have been made clear, less attention has focused on how these experiences affect short- and long-term outcomes from a curricular program level, or how data is used to inform the development of academic programs. We use the six principles identified by O'Neill (2010) to assess the

efficacy of the program: effortful experiences, the development of relationships, engagement across difference, feedback, opportunities to test what is being learned, and reflection.

Interview and questionnaire participants included program alumni, current students, and faculty. Individual, semi-structured interviews and two focus groups were also conducted. Initial data analysis revealed specific outcomes and overall processes of meaningful student engagement. The findings of this study will inform a program re-visioning and provide consideration for how research results can inform the process of mapping, assessing, and revising curricular and programmatic aims.

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